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The Indonesian Press and the East Timor Issue

In order to understand and comprehend the Indonesian Press reporting on East Timor, one should know the basic facts about the Indonesian Press in general. The strong censorship on the press did not start when General Suharto took over in 1965 but already in the period of President Sukarno heavy handed methods were used to curb the press. The argument is always like with other basic freedoms, democracy and human rights, the Indonesian authorities will always claim: the Indonesian way is different.

The best way to begin an account of censorship and control of the press in Indonesia is to quote from the opening chapter of *The Freedom of Press and Information* published by **LBH**, the Legal Aid Institute in Jakarta in 1980 :

> *In its function as a moral force,the press no longer has any leeway to express ideas and opinions. The freedom of the press is no longer based upon its own convictions and idealisms, but is heavily dependent upon on the restrictions imposed by the government, based on what it considers to be in the interests of security and order. From time to time, the mass media does indeed manage to communicate to its readers, listeners or viewers, events and problems as they occur in society. But far too much communication takes place vertically and in one direction only, "from above" and "downwards", without any open and frank controversy.*

The control over the press is multi-layered; in theory the Department of Information is responsible for the overall control of the press but in practice many other structures or individuals play an important role in the curbing of the press. For example through the powerful body called **BAKORSTANAS,** the special coordinating body for national stability. The Head of **BAKORSTANAS** is concurrently the Chief of **ABRI,** the Indonesian Armed Forces. Influence on the press is also exerted through the Ministry of Home Affairs through its **Direktorat Sospol** (Directorate for Social and Political Affairs). The Ministry of Home Affairs is the most militarised Ministry in Indonesia, almost two third of its top officials originate from **ABRI.** The Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs very often steps takes heavy handed measures on the press. The two major Intelligence agencies **BAKIN** and **BAIS** can also interfere in deciding on delicate matters for the press and finally the Journalists' Association **(PWI),** the Society of Newspaper Proprietors **(SPS)** and the Press Council **(BPS)** are all organisations that can play a negative role on the daily performance of an Indonesian journalist.

How it functions

Until the early eighties the Department of Information together with some of the

aforementioned bodies held frequent 'briefing sessions' with all the editors of newspapers and magazines. On these occasions the press received 'off the record' information about sensitive affairs and were basically instructed what is allowed to be published and what is not allowed. Publications who occasionally trespass the boundaries will receive serious warnings or can be immediately be banned. Editors also regularly receive updated lists with names of groups or individuals who are banned from writing, publishing or even making references to.

Another general pattern in the press control is the notorious **budaya telpon** (telephone culture) where the editors receive a phone call in the morning instructing them what they may and may not write. The **budaya telpon** has functioned very effective as the Information Minister Harmoko describes it: "We don't practice censorship. We don't need it, as the press has learned to censor itself".

Another heavy restriction for the press is the **SIUPP**, the publication license issued by the Ministry of Information. Over the years numerous publications had their **SIUPP**s revoked and were forced to close down. A **SIUPP** is revoked after three warnings and functions as the sword of Damocles over the necks of the editors. The three organisations **PWI, SPS** and the **Dewan Pers** have all fallen into line with the Government's wishes and should not be looked upon as their counterparts in other countries. The **PWI** Chairman for example, is Major–General Soegeng Widjaya, editor and managing director of the Army's newspaper **Berita Yudha** and spokesman of the armed forces group in Parliament.

Taboos, delicate subjects and grey areas

Certain topics are 100% taboo and not anybody in the Indonesian press will dare to write about these topics. The most obvious one is critical reporting about President Suharto and his family. Occasionally foreign journalists will write an article about the First Family and be banned indefinitely from entering the country. For the small group of foreign journalists, the restrictions have not been easy. The greatest groups, the Australian journalists at one time were altogether asked to leave the country and at this moment only one single Australian journalist has been permitted to enter Indonesia. The war in East Timor has also been a permanent taboo for the Indonesian press – for the Indonesian journalists military operations in East Timor simply does not exist.

Delicate subjects are many and change from time to time. 'Difficult' regions like West Papua and Aceh can only be dealt with in a very sensitive way. In 1990 a wide series of subversive trials were held against members of **OPM,** the Papuan Liberation Movement. Not a single account appeared in the Indonesian press. The war situation in Aceh was reported in a very laid back way and almost entirely ignoring the killings and brutalities rendered by the Indonesian military.

The grey areas are those topics that might offend somebody in the government or in the leadership of the armed forces. These grey areas are often lethal, because no official ban on the topic has been issued by the government. The leading Protestant daily **Sinar Harapan** was closed down in October 1986 because

it came with a scoop from the Department of Finance on the ongoing devaluation of the Rupiah. Virga Belan, an editorial writer of the daily **Merdeka** was dismissed because he failed to mention the link of the October 1965 events (when Suharto came into power) with a attempt of a communist take-over. Hundreds of examples can be given how Indonesian authorities, feeling offended, take severe repercussions against journalists or publications.

The Arswendo/Monitor case

One of the recent cases of heavy-handed state interference in the press is the case against Arswendo, the editor of **Monitor**, the biggest tabloid magazine in Jakarta. In October 1990 the weekly organised and published an opinion poll about the most popular man in the country. The prophet Mohammad emerged as number 11, while Arswendo came out as number 10. Fanatic Moslim groups started to demonstrate as they regarded the poll as an insult to Islam. The **SIUPP** of Monitor was withdrawn and Arswendo was put on trial and received a five year sentence. The closing down of **Monitor** meant the end of livelihood of many and functioned as another warning for the average journalist to behave in a restrained way and implement selfcensorship excessively.

The reporting about East Timor

As mentioned above, the war in East Timor does not exist for the Indonesian press. The massive Indonesian invasion in December 1975 is persistently portrayed in the Indonesian press as a Timorese civil war where Indonesian volunteers responded upon the call of the majority of the Timorese for assistance. The first few years after the invasion, East Timor was almost totally isolated from the outside world, Indonesian journalists were only allowed in on special occasions. These special occasions were the 'day of the integration' in June 1976, visits from Indonesian MPs or other VIP visits.

Reports on the radio and television, **RRI** and **TVRI**, both state-owned is even more blatant; the broadcasting only channel official government views and propaganda. Occasionally the State television will show some Timorese Cultural groups performing traditional dances, mere as proof that the Timorese culture is being preserved.

East Timor remains one of the most sensitive areas and the press restrictions to report about conditions in that region are enormous. Report about a strong resolution condemning Indonesia's presence in East Timor adopted in September 1988 by the European Parliament was left unreported while a visit of MEPs a month earlier, on the whole favourable for Indonesia, received glowing reports in the Indonesian press.

In this last three years the door has been opened ajar and Indonesian journalists have been reporting more frankly about the situation but the reporting is still confined to several topics. Hints about military operations are not possible. Also important events like Mgr. Belo's call for a referendum in East Timor has

been kept out of the press. The several pro-independence demonstrations, arrests and atrocities since late 1989 is under a complete press ban.

Reading between the lines

Despite the heavy restrictions an interested Indonesian citizen can assemble sufficient information to know the general facts about East Timor. In the early years, during the big-scale war operations till 1982, the news about the heavy casualties on Indonesian side was widely known among the public. It obviously could not be kept secret for the relatives of the deceased soldiers. In this last decade Indonesian ngo's and interested individuals increasingly also relied on information received from abroad. A wide variety of information about East Timor entered Indonesia through different means and channels. It could be publications and journals from East Timor solidarity groups, reports from Human Rights organisations like Amnesty International, reports from international conferences on East Timor, hearings on East Timor in the US Congress, Australian Parliament, reports from church sources and radio reports from different countries like BBC World Service, the Dutch Wereld Omroep, Radio Difusao Portuguesa Internacional or Radio Australia. In addition the many East Timorese studying in Java and Bali have channelled information to their Indonesian friends. These wide variety of information has deepened the knowledge and understanding of many Indonesians about the East Timor issue.

One feature that should not be neglected are the skills of the Indonesian journalist in general to channel information in an indirect way. Indonesian journalists, living constantly on a volcano, have a long tradition of quality reporting about social and political conditions. Within the confides of their own fear psychosis and selfcensorship, the reporters and editors of newspapers and political weeklies have learnt through bitter experience to test the system to its very limits. They will not write about the right of self-determination of the East Timorese but instead will report about the wretched conditions in East Timor. Reports about bad health conditions, large unemployment figures, corruption and abuse of power by Indonesian officials can occasionally be seen in the Indonesian press. Another trick being used by Indonesian journalist is the tactic of negative reporting. While for example slamming hard at a report sympathetic towards an independent East Timor, it enables the journalist to write about that particular report, conference or individual. It can be concluded that on one hand the reporting on East Timor is still facing an almost entire blackout but on the other hand the Indonesian authorities cannot surround East Timor with a 'Chinese Wall' blockade. Information about East Timor seeps through to the outside world and this process is most likely to proceed further.

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